

Cries of Abandonment with True Solidarity: Mark's Final Words of Jesus

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And in the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, my God, for what purpose have you forsaken me?"
Mark 15:34¹

Most people, Christian or not, recognize familiar sayings of Jesus. Whether because of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, another pop-culture reference, or some other connection, people recognize the quotation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Commonly used for Good Friday services, many preach Jesus' seven final sayings from the cross despite these being a combination from all four Gospels. Consequently, Jesus' death can sometimes be romanticized. It allows people to admire Jesus' last words, whether of forgiveness, assurance, completion, or trust.

In the Gospel of Mark, however, Christ's final speech is abandonment. Or is it? Throughout history, interpretations have been diverse on these words. For some, Jesus was reciting Psalm 22 and, if he had made it to the end, these words would be of praiseful hope.² Others take it as true divine abandonment. What are the theological implications of these interpretations? What do these interpretations say about humanity's relationship with God? This article will explore two prominent interpretations of Jesus' cry and propose a third way to incorporate the best of both, considering the biblical witness and theology of the cross.

Theology of the Cross

The theology of the cross is essential to Lutheran theology. It is so vital that some Lutherans have claimed theology of the cross to be the gospel. Theology of the cross has roughly three themes: 1) God is revealed in the last place one would look; 2) God is most

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fully revealed in Jesus, the executed rabbi from Nazareth; and 3) Through the cross, God is revealed to be truly with us in all things, including suffering and death. Like the apophatic mystic tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius or Meister Eckhart, God is both hidden and found within the darkness. Theology of the cross is a lens for biblical interpretation. It emphasizes suffering and the "paradox of God's presence in the world" through the "context of human brokenness and despair."³

Regarding Paul, Andrew Root writes, "God is not made known first in glory, but in brokenness, the brokenness of the body of Jesus."⁴ Here one sees the double kenosis of Christ described in Philippians 2:6-11: the first kenosis is the incarnation, and the second is crucifixion. Paul defines the power of God as the sacrificial love revealed on the horrific cross where the supposed weak fools hang (1 Cor 1:18, 20). God has changed everything by taking the form of a slave, coming down to humanity's utter depth, and joining us as human. God is now with and like humanity in a whole new way.

As Bonhoeffer wrote in one of his letters from prison, "The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help."⁵ In becoming human and

3. Esther Menn, "Interpret Boldly: Lutherans Reading the Bible," in *Lutheran Perspectives on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Laurie Jungling (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2010), 76-77.

4. Andrew Root, *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 75.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 465.

1. Author's translation.
2. William Stacy Johnson, "Jesus' Cry, God's Cry, and Ours," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 81.

suffering and dying like a human, God has made those things “in Christ.” According to Root, “to be “in Christ” “is to encounter the opposite in collision. It is to find the divine in the human, life in suffering, strength in weakness.”⁶

The cross is an act of inclusion by God. God suffers and dies in solidarity with all humans. Everyone lives. Everyone dies. “Shared suffering and despair for the sake of Love is the very fabric of God’s own community.”⁷ The phrase “God is love” from 1 John 4:9 does not merely mean that God loves. Love is the “character of God’s being... and the divine fountain from which the river of divine love flows.”⁸ The cross reveals this love. This love is kenosis and solidarity.

Interpreting Psalm 22

Jesus’ death and Psalm 22, a lament prayer asking for help, have many connections. While Jesus quotes the first line, this does not necessarily mean, however, that Jesus “is piously quoting” the whole psalm as he dies.⁹ Yet, there are more literary parallels.¹⁰ People despise both Jesus and the psalmist (Ps 22:6; Mark 15:29). They shake their heads at the psalmist and at Jesus (Ps 22:7; Mark 15:29). Just as Jesus is crucified beside two bandits (Mark 15:27), evildoers encircle the psalmist (Ps 22:16). Jesus and the psalmist have their clothes divided and lots cast for them (Ps 22:18; Mark 15:24). Both cry out to God in darkness (Ps. 22:2; Mark 15:33-34). In addition, as the psalm proclaims gentiles worshiping the LORD (Ps 22:27), a gentile affirms Jesus as God’s son (Mark 15:39). The psalm begins with prayer for help and ends with praise for help. The psalmist’s cry is met with an answer. They are no longer surrounded by enemies and threats but by people of praise and faith.¹¹ The deliverance of the Lord shows the profound faith in the prayer.

A Shout of Trust and Hope? The first interpretation is that despite Jesus’ words, Jesus did not believe God had abandoned him. Jesus’ cry is for deliverance, not despair. While everyone around Jesus forsook him, God never did. Here interpreters feel the need to save Jesus from the perception that he would ever think or feel God’s absence. Supposedly, Chrysostom and Augustine are among those against complete divine-forsakenness.¹² Sixteenth-century theologian John Foxe wrote that when Christ cried aloud, it was to assure humans that it is normal if they feel abandoned by

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God.¹³ The good news in this view is that God has been through the worst of it and made it out to the other side with faith still intact. By believing that God is present in Christ as he cries out, we can be confident that our cries are joined with Christ’s and redeemed.¹⁴ Therefore, Jesus’ cry is a shout of trust and hope for deliverance.

Linguistically, some claim that the historical meaning of *sabachthani* is not “to leave alone” but “to leave helpless.”¹⁵ This shifts the emphasis from God’s leaving Jesus to God’s letting Jesus die without intervention. Psalm 22 is significant for this view. In the Jewish tradition, pious Jews sometimes hoped to die uttering Psalm 22. For William Stacy Johnson, Jesus’ cry is an “invocation of God’s presence.”¹⁶ It is not a cry saying, “God, you have abandoned me, and are not here.” Rather, it is a cry saying, “God, I trust you are with me.” “Jesus cried not in despair but for deliverance.”¹⁷ In praying this prayer, Jesus is giving his identification with, and permission to, all who pray this prayer.¹⁸

Johnson’s argument hinges on the understanding that Jesus is praying the whole psalm, not just the first line. He claims Mark implies the whole psalm, just as the first line of the Lord’s Prayer calls to mind the rest.¹⁹ This conclusion comes from the combined witness of the New Testament authors, which does not give witness to divine abandonment but trust in the divine presence.²⁰ However, this attempt to clean up Mark and merge it with the other Gospels seems like a betrayal of the text. Each Gospel has its lens through which it tells the story. Attempting to smash them together was deemed unfit in the past and continues to be now.

Divine Abandonment? The second interpretation is that Jesus’ words reflected hard reality; God had truly forsaken him. The words of Psalm 22 mean what they mean. People can say the same words and mean different things. While this interpretation might

6. Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 134.

7. Root, *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church*, 117.

8. Miroslav Volf, “God is Love: A Basic Christian Claim,” *The Christian Century* 127.22 (2010): 30.

9. M Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, eds. C. Clifton Black, M Eugene Boring, and John T. Carroll (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 430.

10. Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” 82.

11. James L. Mays, “Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion,” *Theology Today* 42.3 (1985): 327.

12. Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” 87.

13. Jason K. Lee and William M. Marsh, eds., *Matthew, Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 364.

14. Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” 90.

15. Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1955), 294.

16. Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” 81.

17. Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” 82.

18. Mays, “Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion,” 323.

19. Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” 81.

20. Johnson, “Jesus’ Cry, God’s Cry, and Ours,” 82.

not have the full extent of Psalm 22 as support, they seem to have Paul (2 Cor 5:21, Gal 3:13, and Rom 8:32). This view is about God ripping Godself apart to save us.

Jürgen Moltmann is probably the foremost proponent of this reading. *The Crucified God* is his attempt at working out his theology of the cross. He argues that because the later Gospels, especially Luke and John, attempt to replace this cry of forsakenness with words of triumph, Mark's words are more likely to be historical.²¹ Luther is also a proponent of this view. Deviating from most of church history, Luther believes that God does suffer.²² Since Christ is God, and Christ died, then God died.

This is not to say, however, that the Father died as with Patripassianism, because Christ is not the Father. Luther gave no lectures and preached very little on Mark. This is likely due to the prominent belief of Matthaean priority, coupled with Luther's valuing John's Gospel and Paul's letters over the Synoptic Gospels. Despite Luther never explicitly mentioning this verse from Mark, he does allude to it. Luther's 1519 sermon on Christ's passion claimed that "Christ was forsaken by all, even by God."²³ Additionally, in a later sermon Luther said, "[Jesus] had to taste this separation on the cross."²⁴

This view convinced Moltmann. After reading the words of Jesus' cry in Mark while a prisoner in an English war camp, he concluded, "Here is someone who understands me."²⁵ Moltmann observes, "just as there was a unique fellowship with God in his life... so in his death there was a unique abandonment by God."²⁶ If God does not abandon Jesus, then Jesus' death is just like that of any other. Through the cross and abandonment, God is "the human God of all godless men and those who have been abandoned by God."²⁷ There is a two-way pain going on. "God the Father knows loss and yearning, while God the Son knows the fear and abandonment of slipping into the void."²⁸ For Moltmann, the world itself is Godforsaken and abandoned. Therefore, Jesus must be abandoned to truly join humanity and the rest of creation.

21. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 211.

22. Jeffrey G. Silcock, "The Truth of Divine Impassibility: A New Look at an Old Argument," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 45.3 (2011): 204.

23. Dirk G. Lange, "A Sermon on the Meditation of Christ's Holy Passion, 1519," in *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform*, eds. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2015), 175.

24. Martin Luther, "Holy Saturday Afternoon—March 29, 1529, The Passion: The Words from the Cross; The Death and Burial," in *The 1529 Holy Week and Easter Sermons of Dr. Martin Luther*, intro. and annotated Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Irving L. Sandberg (St. Louis: Concordia, 1998), 114.

25. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, ix.

26. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 217.

27. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 281.

28. Root, *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church*, 86.

A third view is that while Jesus truly felt—and believed himself to be—abandoned, God never actually forsook him. Like most things coming from Lutheran theology, it is a paradox. Was Jesus abandoned by the Father? Yes. Did the Father abandon Jesus? No.

Subjective abandonment and objective solidarity

Much of the first interpretation seems to come from the need for God to be impassible. However, if God does not suffer, can God be genuinely with those who suffer? One thing Johnson gets right is, "because God did *not* abandon Jesus in the time of his trial, we come to see that God draws near in grace to all who are poor, weak, defeated, or lost."²⁹ Additionally, complete divine abandonment creates cause for pause. However, true forsakenness is likely better than none at all. A significant critique of the divine abandonment theory is because "it teaches that God is able to be *with* God's children in their suffering only by being *against* Jesus at the time of his cry."³⁰

A third view is that while Jesus truly felt—and believed himself to be—abandoned, God never actually forsook him. Like most things coming from Lutheran theology, it is a paradox. Was Jesus abandoned by the Father? Yes. Did the Father abandon Jesus? No. Subjectively, from Jesus' perspective, the Father was not with him. However, objectively, the Father was with Jesus in solidarity the whole way through. Since Jesus still dies and the Father loses the Son to death, the double pain of the Father and Son remains true. Sixteenth-century Lutheran theologian Aegidius Hunnius comes close to this view, claiming that Christ did truly feel what it was like to be abandoned by God and that this was "Christ's profoundest 'descent into hell.'"³¹

In this interpretation, the call back to Psalm 22 is not concerned with Jesus' thoughts but with how the reader should perceive the whole situation. While the end of Psalm 22 might have been in Mark's mind, it is doubtful it was so for Jesus.³² From Jesus' point of view, God had genuinely left and forsaken him. However, the reader knows that the Father would never abandon Jesus. Similarly, this reveals to us that God will never abandon us, even if we cannot see or feel God present.

Grammatically, the translation might be better rendered as

29. Johnson, "Jesus' Cry, God's Cry, and Ours," 90.

30. Johnson, "Jesus' Cry, God's Cry, and Ours," 88.

31. Lee and Marsh, *Matthew*, 365.

32. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. John Collins (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 1063.

“My God, my God, for what purpose did you forsake me?” The verbal construction used in verse 34, *eis ti*, often translated as “why,” leads one to focus on cause. Instead of focusing on the past cause for God’s abandonment, perhaps the focus should be on the purpose of this forsaking. For what purpose did God seemingly forsake Jesus on the cross? Christ needed to know what it felt like to be abandoned by God to be truly in solidarity with us. In his cry and death, Jesus is now in complete identification with humanity. Just as everyone at some point feels forsaken by God, so now also Christ.

Taking the word from Luther, *Anfechtung* is a German word that does not translate well into English. Often it is translated as “struggle” or “suffering.” Spiritually, one can understand it as the state of having been abandoned by God.³³ However, considering a theology of the cross, it is in this moment that we can be most sure that God is with us. When we feel God-forsaken, it is there that the gracious and loving God finds us.³⁴ This is why it is so essential for Christ actually to feel forsaken. If Christ never felt this, how could Christ be with anyone who does? In Jesus’ cry, death, and resurrection, God is finally with us in all things, including the feeling of abandonment, the reality of death, and the hope of new life. Suffering and death are no longer things that separate humanity from God, for God brought suffering and death into Godself.

Conclusion

The final words of Christ in Mark’s Gospel have theological implications. The first view, which reads the words as a prayer out of praise and hope, creates limitations on Christ’s solidarity with humanity in God-forsakenness. The second view of real divine abandonment, which sees the words as unveiling the reality that the Father has abandoned the Son, creates issues within the Trinity and problems of trust. Acknowledging a third view may not explicitly be necessary for God truly to be with humanity in our plight; divine abandonment could still be viable.

This third view of subjective abandonment and objective solidarity, which I propose here, rejects the idea that Jesus would never feel abandoned by the Father as if those emotions were beyond Jesus Christ. It also keeps the Father from actually abandoning the Son. If the Father abandons Jesus in his hour of extreme suffering and agony, where is the assurance that we will not be abandoned in our hour of need? Subjective abandonment and objective solidarity safeguards Christ’s doubt, fear, and anxiety as real, just as human doubt, fear, and anxiety are real. It also keeps the love and solidarity of the Father with the Son intact. There is no wedge driven between the love among the persons of the Trinity.

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For a theology of the cross to work and for God to be with humanity in all their suffering and feelings, understanding Jesus as a pious rabbi who would never doubt God’s presence does not fit. Humans will always, at times, feel God’s absence. However, when we feel forsaken and cry out in abandonment, we can be comforted by the gospel truth that we are not alone in our suffering. Christ is crying out alongside us. Just as God never abandoned Jesus, God will never abandon us.

33. Deanna A. Thompson, “Hoping for More: How Eschatology Matters for Lutheran Feminist Theologies,” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, ed. Mary J. Streufert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 228.

34. Winston Persaud, “The Theology of the Cross and Marx’s Concept of Man, with Reference to the Caribbean” (Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, University of St. Andrews, 1980), 164.